

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord, December 24, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

The Light of the World

One of the great things about living in South Carolina's coastal "lowcountry" is that the stars seem to shine so brightly. It's like when you were a child and there was so much less light pollution. There's a special darkness around here when there's no moon in the sky. The stars seem to "come out" with a special clarity—igniting like bright sparks of light. If you watch closely, you can see all sorts of constellations and the entire "Milky Way" which looks like an immense river flowing slowly and steadily through outer space. The sky and the horizon blend as one. It's a magical sight, a free ticket to that place where the temporal embraces the spatial—no distinction between time and space. You have a sense of staring right into eternity...a celestial window through which one might actually glimpse the face of God.

I want to invite you right now to imagine yourself as some sort of galactic hitchhiker traveling through space. Pretend, with me, that you are flying through the night sky. You speed past the star called Vega and the constellation named Hercules. You spiral outward through the belt of Orion. You race now, infinitely faster, toward the far edge of the universe. You note that the light seems to be dimming, definitely receding. Ahead there's only darkness. Directly before you lies only utter darkness, a place unimaginably empty, darker even than the darkness of space itself. There's something ominous looming.

You can't actually see a "Black Hole" You perceive it. You sense it only because of the absolute absence of everything else. No light, no time, no dimension. It simply devours everything, sucking into its bottomless swirling abyss you and everything else. There is no escape, no hope.

But, here's the amazing thing: right there, right then—at the moment when everything is darkest and all seems lost, here comes the gift that makes ALL the difference! At the very center of every Black Hole lies the womb of Creation itself—a mere speck of light that will, eventually, give a new birth to the entire universe. You see, this is the rule of the heavens that has been repeated for billions and billions of years: light can only be recreated in this place where there seems to be no life at all, no hope at all—in the middle of a Black Hole. Light first appears as a mere speck, a pinprick, gradually growing into a tiny star. You see only a tiny twinkle of light. You imagine that you are seeing the star but, in fact, the star is apprehending YOU. That star has existed for trillion of years, eons of time before you were ever thought about. It's feeble but enduring light has been traveling for light years of time, light to this very moment, right to the edge of your own life. It happens over and over. Whenever you have found the darkness most overwhelming—times in your life of confusion, uncertainty, loneliness, and despair—it is precisely into that darkness that new light and life still shines.

The ancient prophet Isaiah knew all about the dark nights of the human soul—our own and that of the whole human race. He knew that we all walk in darkness. He knew that, deep down, all of us struggle with darkness—as individuals and as nations. We can't raise ourselves up into the light by our own efforts. No amount of scientific breakthroughs, taller skyscrapers, or even balanced budgets will ever offset the reality of violence, terrorism, famines, and pandemics. Though education and knowledge can help, left to our own devices, we are just like our hypothetical galactic hitchhiker who we left out there

teetering on the brink, swirling toward unavoidable destruction and disaster, caught up in impenetrable darkness.

WHAT WE NEED IS LIGHT.

Isaiah has it right when he tells us that there is no earthly hope, but from Heaven on high comes something totally unexpected. Those who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them...and the angel said to them: “Fear not for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

If you imagine that the story about how the light of that Christmas star coming into a darkened world is only about the birth of a baby, a beautiful and precious little fable about innocence being born yet again, just like every other year, this time the same as the last, you will miss the point and you will be disappointed yet again. This Christmas Eve night shines with the brightness of midday because eternity itself—the ever gentle, gracious, good, and loving God of Heaven and earth—is transcending the barrier dividing time from space. The God who is the source of all that you are and all that you have is coming to us IN-PERSON tonight. God is breaking through as light, and life, and hope—coming to dispel our darkness with the light of truth, freedom, peace, and love.

“Unto us a Child is born, a Son is given”. The light of the world is coming. The light of the world is right here in this place. That’s what Christmas is all about. The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Tonight, this very Christmas Eve, pure love has permitted itself to be pulled into the Black Hole of our own chaotic world, spiraling down from Heaven on high until it comes to rest in a humble stable, among piles of hay, barn stalls, and lowly animals. **Emmanuel** is the name of that light—“God with us.” That’s exactly what is happening right now—God is coming among us, entering every human heart that is open to receive the divine presence. God is coming with light to drive out darkness, death, and fear. God comes because in God’s eyes we are apprehended, we are seen, and we are deemed worthy.

YOU are deemed worthy. For YOU the light is shining in the darkness. The star is beckoning to you, saying “LOOK up!” Look up and see something that you have never seen before: a glorious light that reveals the very heart of all Creation. Shining through the darkness is the wonderful truth that God is love and that there is hope even in the midst of total darkness for all those who will see and share that love, living in peace with one another.

And, suddenly, there appeared the heavenly host, who began praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God’s people on earth.’

Peace to God’s people on earth. Amen, Amen.